The Exegetical Traditions of ᶜĀʾisha: Notes on their Impact and Significance*

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In the chapter devoted to the exegesis of the Qur'an in Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 42 of the 457 traditions cited are credited to ᶜĀʾisha bint Abī Bakr (d. 58/678).[1] Bukhārī (d. 250/870) applies these 42 traditions to some 63 Qur'anic verses pertaining to a wide range of topics. These traditions are also often cited in medieval Sunnī exegeses of these verses. However, most secondary sources provide little indication as to how this apparent evidence that an early Muslim woman was seen as an exegetical authority might be understood in relation to the development of early and medieval Qur'anic exegesis. In modern works, ᶜĀʾisha tends to be studied primarily with reference to the Qur'anic verses traditionally read (by Sunnīs) as alluding to her, while the exegetical traditions traced back to her have received comparatively little detailed consideration.

This article attempts to contribute to the discussion of the complex questions surrounding the exegetical material traced back to ᶜĀʾisha by examining six traditions from Bukhārī's chapter on exegesis, each of which depict her role in ways that go beyond simple transmission. It will be argued that Bukhārī depicts ᶜĀʾisha as an exegetical authority, and that medieval Sunnī Qur'an-interpreters generally recognise traditions credited to her as authoritative, although the degree to which they do so varies for a number of reasons. These texts will be studied as portrayals of ᶜĀʾisha's exegetical activity; however, the question of the authenticity of these individual texts is beyond the scope of this study.[2]

Three of the texts relate to fundamental issues of Muslim belief, and the remaining three discuss aspects of Hajj. These particular traditions have been selected because their relation to topics of central concern to Sunnī 'orthodox' belief and public worship makes them particularly relevant to questions of interpretive authority. The texts will be considered in terms of the three main ways in which they portray ᶜĀʾisha's exegetical activity: as a transmitter and 'active interlocutor'[3] of the Prophet's words; as an exegete; and as a participant in exegetical debates.

Characterising Traditions Credited to ᶜĀʾisha

A number of Qur'anic verses are traditionally associated with ᶜĀʾisha's life, most notably a passage referring to an accusation of adultery made against an unnamed Muslim woman (Q. 24:11–20), and a section referring to conflict within the Prophet's

household (Q. 66:1–5). Some of the exegetical traditions regarding such verses are credited to her.[4] Medieval exegetes used such verses and exegetical traditions to construct an ideal model of life for all Muslim women based on 'quiet domesticity; modest comportment, indeed, invisibility through veiling … wifely obedience'.[5] Therefore, the body of traditions traced back to ʿĀʾisha tends to be characterised as mainly concerned with gender relations and/or domestic affairs. Although the existence of reports credited to her about theological topics[6] and rituals such as prayer and pilgrimage[7] has been recognised, contemporary attention tends to be focused on how the gender-related or domestic texts have been used to prevent women from participating in public life.[8]

Traditions credited to ʿĀʾisha tend therefore to be seen as aspects of her idealisation as a dutiful wife,[9] and this focuses attention on the instrumental aspects of transmission as 'a process which depends upon proximity and memory'[10] as opposed to focusing on the exegetical process per se. In such a reading of exegetical reports traced back to ʿĀʾisha, the portrayal is perceived to be that of a woman playing an essentially instrumental role by virtue of her status as wife of the Prophet. This implies that, although reports traced back to her were used by classical scholars to interpret the Qur'an, ʿĀʾisha herself is not being depicted as an exegete.

However, Leila Ahmed highlights aspects of subjectivity and agency present in depictions of early Muslim women transmitting traditions. She points out that they 'comment forthrightly on … even the Qur'an', and question Muḥammad, who 'readily responded to their comments'. She also remarks that for medieval scholars '[t]o accept women's testimony on the words and deeds of the Prophet was to accept their authority on matters intended to have a prescriptive, regulatory relation to mores and laws'.[11] Such an approach to exegetical traditions makes it possible to ask whether ʿĀʾisha is in fact portrayed in these *ḥadīth*-texts as an exegete.[12]

While contemporary studies of prominent women within religious groups often differentiate between those women who achieve status in their own right, and those who have status as a result of their connection to powerful or holy men (with the wives of the Prophet cited as examples of the latter),[13] this distinction may be misleading when analysing the dynamics of authority in Bukhārī's portrayal of ʿĀʾisha as a transmitter, as Bukhārī portrays some prominent male companions both as exegetical authorities and as enjoying proximity to Muḥammad.[14]

For example, Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687) is a major source of exegetical material for Bukhārī and, according to him, was highly esteemed as an interpreter of the Qur'an by none other than the second rightly-guided caliph, ʿUmar (r. 13/634–24/644).[15] Yet as a cousin of the Prophet and nephew of Muḥammad's wife, Maymūna bint al-Ḥārith, Ibn ʿAbbās visits the Prophet often and stays the night with him, thus

observing his night prayers;[16] similarly, Ibn Masʿūd is reported to have frequently visited the Prophet and to have served him to the extent that he was known as 'the carrier of the [Prophet's] shoes, toothbrush and ablution-jar'.[17] Such proximity is not only often equated with greater opportunities to learn the Qur'an from the Prophet himself, but is also regarded as a reflection of that person's worthiness in the eyes of God,[18] and is therefore an important element of their portrayal as exegetical authorities.

As these portrayals of proximity indicate, characterising Bukhārī's portrayal of ʿĀʾisha in the exegetical traditions which he traces back to her is a complex matter. It is necessary to take a close look at the approaches to transmission depicted in these texts in order to be able to assess the degree to which ʿĀʾisha is being presented as exercising exegetical authority.

ʿĀʾisha as a Transmitter and Active Interlocutor

The following traditions are presented in a statement–question–answer form: Muḥammad makes a statement, ʿĀʾisha questions him about it, and he replies.

a) The Reckoning of the Day of Judgement

> ʿĀʾisha narrated: 'The Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace) said, "There is none whose account will be questioned who will not perish".' She said, 'I asked, "Messenger of God, may God make me your ransom. Does God, the Glorious, the Exalted, not say, *Then whoever is given his account in his right hand, he truly will receive an easy reckoning*? [Q. 84:7–8]" He replied, "That is the presentation [of accounts], but the one whose record is questioned will perish".'[19]

The variant of this tradition cited by Bukhārī in his chapter on learning, in the sub-chapter entitled 'One who heard something and asked until he understood it', is prefaced by the comment of the sub-narrator that it was the practice of ʿĀʾisha to repeatedly inquire about anything that she had heard but did not understand, until she had grasped it fully.[20] Thus Bukhārī presents this type of transmission as exemplary as well as thoroughly reliable. A number of the other traditions he relates from ʿĀʾisha on the subject of the Day of Judgement are also presented in this form.[21]

Ṭabarī (d. 310/922) recounts eight variants of ʿĀʾisha's tradition;[22] Qurṭubī (d. 656/1258) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1372) both quote her tradition and accept it as the correct interpretation of the verse; as does Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505).[23] Some versions relate that she heard the Prophet praying that he would be granted an easy reckoning, and later asked him what he had meant,[24] which could point to an attempt to down-